TOPcast Episode #152:
Still “Be Prepared” for Disruption with Digital Learning

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(*Musical Intro*)

Kelvin: From the University of Louisville's Delphi Center for Teaching and Learning…

Tom: And the University of Central Florida's Center for Distributed Learning…

Kelvin: I am Kelvin Thompson.

Tom: And I am Tom Cavanagh.

Kelvin: And you are listening to TOPcast, the Teaching Online Podcast. Hey, Tom.

Tom: Hey, Kelvin. How are things?

Kelvin: [Sips coffee] I've got a good cup of coffee and a mug that fits my hand nicely. How bad could they be?

Tom: Yeah, you look very dapper today…

Kelvin: Well, thank you.

Tom: ...and you're drinking out of your Louisville mug, so, yeah. That's cool. Oh, look at you. It's a personalized Dr. Thompson mug. Very cool.

Kelvin: Speaker gift from a recent talk. Wasn't that lovely?

Tom: That is nice. Yeah. And man, perfect for you. Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: I like it.

Kelvin: Well-chosen.

Tom: I'm drinking the non-thematically selected Diet Coke. [Laughter]

Kelvin: [Laughter] That might be a first!

Tom: A differently caffeinated beverage for me at the moment.

Kelvin: [Laughter] That's right. It's brown.

Tom: It's brown, yeah. And it's caffeinated.

Kelvin: Not hot, not hot.

Tom: So, it'll do for now.

Kelvin: Fizzier than normal.

Tom: [Laughter] That's right. Than my typical coffee, yes.

Kelvin: Oh, my gosh. I am, today, drinking a very, very serviceable, very approachable single-origin Guatemala from local coffee roaster, Heine Brothers, which I still refuse to call Heine ("Hiney") Brothers, which everybody else does, but Heine ("Hineh") Brothers. And I think this serves often as their coffee of the day, but it's a very tasty coffee. But it's something that they just offer out. They don't call it a house blend, but almost like a house blend. A coffee for everybody all the time, you might say. So, my coffee's good. I sure hope your lukewarm Diet Coke is good. [Laughter]

Tom: It is. It is good, yeah.

Kelvin: But I wonder if you might find a connection to today's topic in my cup.

Tom: I'm not sure I do. I feel like my only observation is you got to work on your own personal maturity and the pronunciation of the roaster.

Kelvin: The maturity.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: Again, with the maturity. That's right, I know. [Chuckles]

Tom: No, so maybe you could help me out a little.

Kelvin: I was thinking about the broadly approachable Coffee of the Day, coffee for everybody all the time…

Tom: Okay.

Kelvin: And we have a guest today who is from an organization that sounds a little bit like that. Every Learner Everywhere.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: And so, I thought, well, maybe that's not a bad thing. Open access coffee, if you will.

Tom: [Chuckles] There you go.

Kelvin: So, you, Tom, recently interviewed our colleague, Patti O'Sullivan, from Every Learner Everywhere. Patti serves there as manager of content development and special projects. She's been at a number of different institutions. Dear listener, you might've run across Patti in your journey at some point. I ran across Patti some years ago in Anaheim, as I recall, at an APLU gathering. She's been at several institutions. She's been at the University of Mississippi in a variety of roles during the last 20 years or so. So, I thought it was a good conversation. Anything you want to say about the interview before we cut to it?

Tom: No, not really. I think it stands on its own. I think it's a really important topic, and I always enjoyed talking to Patti. I have known her since she was at University of Mississippi, and so, I think you'll get a lot out of it.

Kelvin: All right. Through the modern technological marvel that is podcast time travel, here is your interview with Patti O'Sullivan.

(*Transition Music*)

Tom: So, Patti, thank you so much for being on TOPcast.

Patti: Thank you, Tom. It's such a pleasure to be on your podcast.

Tom: Great. Well, maybe the first place to start is in helping our audience, maybe better understand the Every Learner Everywhere organization. Your mission, how long you've been around, what are your goals, and what you're trying to accomplish.

Patti: Sure. Thank you for that question. Every Learner Everywhere was established in 2017 with funding from the Gates Foundation. We are a network of different organizations including the APLU, the Association of Public Land-grant Universities, Online Learning Consortium, Achieving the Dream, Titan Partners, Intentional Futures – there's 12 of us altogether. I won't list us all, but we are a network of organizations with the mission of helping institutions, like UCF, public institutions, some private institutions, use technology to innovate their teaching to make better outcomes for certain targeted populations. Students who

are Black, Latino, Indigenous, Poverty-affected, and First Generation. So, we're really trying to blend together equity in teaching, digital learning, and best teaching practices.

Tom: Great. Thank you. I think that helps to orient for everybody who might be listening who may not be familiar with Every Learner Everywhere, but may actually be familiar with some of the work. So, thank you for setting that up. What I'd like to maybe spend a few minutes talking about today is something that the organization published not that long ago. This document, “Planning for Academic Continuity: A Guide for Academic Leaders.” And I was honored to be a part of that and contributed just a little bit to some of it with an interview and a case study, but I think there's some really valuable information in there that others would really benefit from. So, maybe the first place to start in that is just what is an academic continuity plan?

Patti: Sure. It's a plan. [Laughter] So, it's a set of policies, procedures, recommendations, and resources, mainly for faculty, but for institutional communities, in general. But because we're focused on academic continuity, we're just going to focus on the recommendations and resources for faculty in continuing to teach, to help students continue to learn during disruptions. And COVID was a perfect example of this, right? It was something very sudden, unexpected, and very long-term. And so, a lot of schools developed academic continuity plans in light of COVID. We had that first phase of emergency remote teaching where everybody scrambled, where we weren't really sure was this going to last two weeks?

Is it going to be two months? Turned out to be two years. [Chuckles] And then, over that summer after the initial COVID lockdown, that's when institutions really started to become intentional about, "Okay, we're going to do this in the fall, this remote teaching. It needs to be better. It needs to better serve our learners." And so, a lot of institutions are familiar with academic continuity planning. What concerned me, and one of the reasons why I wanted to provide this resource really was to look into what are institutions doing with their COVID academic continuity plans?

Are they taking them offline now that the emergency period is over? Are they transitioning into, "We could use this for other disruptions?" And so, it was fascinating to me. I had three student interns at the time that we were doing this research. We analyzed over a hundred academic continuity plans just to see what institutions were doing. And it did surprise me how we actually had to look up about 175 institutions because so many institutions had taken down or archived their webpages with the academic continuity plans. And it just raised the question in my mind, because I kept seeing around me, there's hurricanes, there's institutions that have to shut down because of a murder, because of water quality, because of wildfires. So many things were disrupting academics beyond COVID,

and it just really surprised me that institutions were not using what they learned from COVID to meet these other situations.

Tom: Yeah.

Patti: So, I guess I gave you a long answer there.

Tom: No, but that…

Patti: But I just wanted to give you the broader context to why we did this research.

Tom: Yeah. No, that helps. And it actually touches on the next question, which was why? Why do you use them? What an academic continuity plan is. But you already addressed the next one, which is why should institutions have them? I think about my own experience. I've been at UCF for a long time, but it seems like we have a hurricane every year that we're going to have to deal with. We had a global pandemic, like everybody. But even prior to coming here, I was at an institution where there was a tornado. It went right down the middle of campus on Christmas day, and just tore everything up, and destroyed the administration building. So, things happen, and you may not know what it's going to be. You mentioned wildfires, and mudslides, and active shooters, and whatever the case might be. There's all kinds of reasons, and they're almost all bad, why a campus would need to close down, and have a plan for continuing the business of the institution. And it seems like it's almost always online, right? That seems to be the solution.

Patti: Yeah, I agree with you, and I mean, that's part of our mission at Every Learner is to be promoting digital learning. But that was the solution, at least for the COVID pandemic. But, you're right, it seems like we go digital no matter what the situation is. And I'm going to quote one of the people who has interviewed for this resource from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and his name is escaping me, but I will find it. I think it's Tim Reid, but he said that if you don't have a plan, you're not ready. If you're not planning, you're not ready. So, I think the planning is important. I mean, listen, we do fire drills still. [Chuckles]

Tom: Right, right.

Patti: But we're not doing wildfire drills, or we're not doing flooding drills, or “there's a raccoon infestation in the building” drills. And these were all real things that we found.

Tom: Yeah, we had bats in our library at one point.

Patti: Okay. [Light chuckle]

Tom: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's true. I mean, what is it? The Boy Scout motto? “Be prepared,” right? And so, you continue to practice and rehearse. Well, and to that end, you've provided some practical guidance for people within this document, including five key strategies that you're recommending that people adopt. And I thought maybe we can just quickly go through those and maybe you could comment on a few of them.

Patti: Sure.

Tom: The first one is to “Lead with equity and embed it in every part of academic continuity planning.” Why do you think equity is so important in this?

Patti: Well, I think we all learned during COVID that we were all experiencing the same pandemic, but we didn't experience it the same way. If you had resources, you were better insulated from the pandemic. And that's true with the students on campus. If you lived in a location where you had really good broadband, you were lucky enough to have a laptop or some other device that you could do your schoolwork from, if you were fortunate enough to have a quiet space to study, those were the students that maybe had a better COVID learning experience than others. I know at my own institution, the University of Mississippi, and I was on the COVID Planning Task Force, we were mapping out across the state of Mississippi where were there hotspots that the students could go drive up, and sit in their car, and do their work from. And in the summer, that was really problematic because it's really hot.

There was some remote teaching still in the winter. The students were cold. Students who were sitting in a car outside of McDonald's, and they were frequently going to this place, someone called the police on them. And it's stories like that that make you realize we are not having the same experience. And so, to get back to equity, I mean, it's everything. If you're not thinking about equity, you're not doing equity. And if we're not going to lead with equity, we're basically saying, "We're willing to accept inequity in how students are learning," and I don't know any institution that's going to be okay with that, that would affirmatively say, "Yeah, we're okay with inequity.” So, thinking through equity is really important. Talking to the people who can tell you what they need is really, really important.

Tom: Yeah. Wow. Yeah, those stories really bring it home. And you're right. I mean, COVID, since it affected everybody, you can really see how it affected different people differently based on all of those things that you just mentioned. That's a great example. Your second strategy is “Plan for a variety of academic disruption scenarios.” You mentioned a few of them, but how does an institution go about planning for things that it isn't necessarily even predicting, or forecasting, or has on its radar?

Patti: Yeah. No, that's a great question. And I have to say, credit for this strategy really, again, comes from the Academic Continuity Plan at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. They have a fantastic comprehensive plan that we highlighted in the resource with links to it. We interviewed some of the people who developed the plan in the resource, but just to say that they really looked at different categories, and I thought it was fascinating. They have a category for if your facilities are compromised. So, you mentioned you worked at a school, Tom, that had a tornado that took out the administrative building. What do you do if you lose all your student records?

And that's maybe there wasn't teaching going on there, but it affects students. What if the registrar's office is taken out? [Chuckles] So, you have to have a plan for what happens if your facilities are compromised. There was another scenario that talked about what happens when your faculty are compromised. What if something happens to the faculty? It could be a labor strike, but it could be something devastating that happens to your faculty. Who's going to teach your students? So, I thought that was really interesting that they looked at that. I mean, those were just two scenarios. But during COVID, there was none of that. It was just that we couldn't physically be together because of the virus. But, I mean, that's another scenario. But, as we did research, all these just really weird things kept coming up, like Jackson State, and other schools, too, in the Jackson, Mississippi area, but they had to shut down intermittently over a three-month period because of water quality issues.

It was just a public health issue. There was nothing wrong with the campus. There was nothing wrong with the students. There was nothing wrong with the faculty. It was just something out of their control was happening. And, like you said, there were bats in your library. [Chuckles] At the University of Mississippi over Christmas break, there was flooding in a building that meant it had to be offline for the first month of classes. So, scenarios don't have to affect the entire university. It could even affect one department being displaced because of raccoons, or one faculty member being displaced. My partner as a Chair of Modern Languages and employs a lot of faculty who are here on work visas, well, some of them went home during COVID, and it was hard to get back. What do you do when your faculty member is stuck in another country? And you're right, you can't think of all of them, but if you can categorize them in terms of facilities, faculty, maybe other parts of your infrastructure, at least you can start with something, right?

Tom: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's good. Thank you. Your next strategy is “Assess student needs based on the nature and impact of the crisis or the disruption.” I mean, I guess maybe that's similar to your equity. Not every student is going to need the same kind of support, right?

Patti: Yeah. So, again, in COVID, we found that every time we thought we addressed a need, you peel back a layer, and there's another whole set of needs. And so, it

wasn't just, "Oh, the students need broadband." The students needed devices. The students needed flexibility because they, maybe, were all quarantining. Maybe they went home, and there's a lot of people in the same house stressing out the broadband, or there's one or two devices that six people are using, or there just isn't a quiet space in the house. So, we kept peeling back these layers. Then, we found out that some students were housing insecure, were food insecure. And so, really, again, just talking to the people who are affected, the best way to address this strategy is find out what they need. What is preventing you from maximizing your learning during this period?

What can we do to help you? There were schools that set up food banks, just gave cash to students. I know at my own institution, we relieved certain fees that prevented students from registering for classes. If it was below a certain threshold, we didn't penalize them. We said, "You can go ahead and register for your classes. We know you'll get to this bill later, or maybe we'll forgive it with some of the COVID funding that we get." So, yeah, again, it's thinking through the scenarios, but then talking to the people who are affected, so that you can assess what students need rather than assuming what they need.

Tom: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. And, again, COVID is the perfect laboratory that we used for some of this. Your fourth strategy is one that we've touched on already with the digital technologies, online technologies, but it's to “Include the basics of teaching using the most used digital technologies at your institution.”

Patti: I think a lot of institutions did a good job with this when it came to Zoom. And, no, Zoom is not sponsoring this podcast. I don't know, are they? [Laughter]

Tom: [Laughter] No, they're not.

Patti: They should. But since so many people were relying on Zoom, lots of institutions, and even Zoom itself, really came through and had workshops and really made sure that faculty and students were trained up to use that technology because we were all relying on it. But then, we found out that there are lots of other technologies that were being used that students hadn't used previously, and it was stressful for them. But faculty couldn't know this because faculty are like, "Okay, this is helping me teach my students," maybe not realizing that students taking five or six classes, maybe five or six different faculty members, are using five or six different platforms or tools, and that's a huge cognitive load for the students. And I'd like to hear your thoughts on this, as someone who runs a digital learning center, but I love the variety of tools that we have out there and available to us.

But, at the same time, that variety, it was burdensome for the students. And so, maybe, institutions really need to take an audit of what do faculty use? What are the tools being used at your institution? And what should we train people on? And also, just looking at your learning management system. If the learning management system can do something, why would you use another tool to do that

same thing when the students, they probably have some familiarity with the LMS. And, again, it's just less of a burden for them to have to learn to use a new tool. But I'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

Tom: Well, no, I think you're absolutely right. It does add cognitive load to students the more stuff they have to navigate, the more difference there is. But even, I think, from an institutional administrative standpoint, it's hard to support at scale, like we did during COVID with a lot of different tools. It's easier if you can centralize on a smaller subset of tools and not maybe give as many options, but be able to go deep on those options that you do have. It's a balance, yeah.

Patti: Yeah.

Tom: All right. So, the last strategy, "Maintain institutional readiness for academic disruption." Your fire drill, right?

Patti: Yeah, your fire drill, but a lot of this is training a faculty. I mean, just what we were talking about before. If you have an institutional contract with Zoom, or even with your LMS, or with some other tool that the majority of faculty are using, there should just be regular trainings on it, either through the vendors, if you have a Center for Teaching and Learning, it could be through that organization, or maybe it's a separate digital learning center. However, it happens, there needs to be regular training of faculty on these tools in anticipation of these disruptions. And it's harder to train students because they come and go. But, like you said, if we can minimize how many tools we're using, that would help somewhat with that. But, yeah, we do fire drills once a term.

Why not have a drill or a training session for academic disruption once a term, or at least once a year, or maybe during new faculty orientation. I mean, somewhere we need to have this preparedness. And then, also, I think it's a standing committee. And I know faculty might hear this and groan and be like, "Great, another committee to be assigned to." But, again, we have committees to plan for so many things, if we are not planning for these disruptions, then nothing else matters. If we can't teach, then we can't do a lot of the other things we're planning for. So, that's why I think that's important. And then, just maintaining your technological infrastructure. If you have a really big student class, if you have a thousand more students this term than you did last term, are you growing your IT department, or are you working with IT to make sure that you've got the infrastructure ready that, if you all had to go online, suddenly you could do that?

Tom: Yeah, it's great advice. In fact, all of it is great advice, and such a wealth of information inside this resource. I highly recommend everybody go take a look at it. Patti, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today on TOPcast.

Patti: Thank you, Tom. It's been a pleasure.

(*Musical Transition*)

Kelvin: Well, Tom, that was your interview with Patti O'Sullivan.

Tom: Yeah. I always, like I said, enjoy talking to Patti, and this topic, this academic continuity, is something that I think all of us have dealt with recently throughout the world. So, it's a topic we could all relate to, but I don't think it's exclusive, as Patti went through, to just worldwide pandemics, as much as that may be on everyone's minds. I talked a little bit about the fact that we have a hurricane here in Orlando, it seems like, every year, at least one that we have to deal with at some point. So, yeah, there's always something. And fortune favors the prepared, or as the Boy Scouts say, "Be prepared."

Kelvin: Yeah, I think all that's right. And while it was certainly understandable to anchor to that broadly shared experience, I'd be a little bit concerned that some folks might dismiss the continuity of operations as, "Wasn't that a COVID thing?" And there's this, "Okay, can't we move on?" But here's what I was thinking. I think this episode oddly bookends episode number… I've got it right here, Episode #61 of TOPcast, which was "Beyond the Coronavirus: Continuity of Operations and Online Learning," which we recorded in February of 2020 and released on March 2nd of 2020…

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: ...using Coronavirus as just one example, among many.

Tom: Yeah. Wow.

Kelvin: "This is probably going to be over in a couple of weeks."

Tom: I remember recording that, and we were talking about, "Man, can you believe what's going on in China?"

Kelvin: Exactly, so.

Tom: Yeah, yeah.

Kelvin: But there's us talking about the importance of continuity of operations pre-global pandemic, I mean, really. And here we are talking, we are in late 2023 as we're recording and releasing this. But I think, by those two points in time, the topic is still relevant regardless of a global pandemic.

Tom: Absolutely. And I kept thinking, and you may recall this, Kelvin, from your time here, but we would sometimes show up in other departments what were called COOP plans, Continuity of Operations Plans.

Kelvin: Yes, that's right. That's right.

Tom: We all had to do them at one point. And I remember finding out that the College of Health and Public Affairs, as it was called at the time, had a plan for if the COHPA building burned down, "We'll just go a hundred percent online." [Chuckles] And, well, when I found that out, I was like, "Okay, good plan, but we should know that we are the solution to your plan so that we are prepared."

Kelvin: That's right.

Tom: And it actually wasn't such an idle thing because that almost happened. Somebody left a candle burning in that building at one point, and fortunately, tragedy was averted.

Kelvin: I remember that.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: Yeah. Another thing I thought of during your conversation with Patti is there were all kinds of different examples used, and some things you can think ahead about, but they're not the things you're going to pull a binder off of a shelf to go, "Oh, how do we handle this?" Like an active shooter thing, you're not going to pull a binder off of a shelf.

Tom: Right.

Kelvin: You're going to try to remember that they told you, "Run, hide, fight," or something, right?

Tom: Right, right.

Kelvin: You're going to try to remember those concepts. But other things where you've got lead time on a hurricane, or you're watching something develop, you can go, "Okay, well, we've thought ahead. Now, let's turn our attention to this plan." And I think digital learning is much more in that latter category than in the former category.

Tom: Yeah, although we have been reactive in the past where something has happened. And when we took in all of those students from Puerto Rico…

Kelvin: Oh, yes. That's right, yeah.

Tom: ...after they had a bad hurricane that hit them…

Kelvin: Yeah, that's right.

Tom: It was Maria.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Tom: So, we have reacted to situations elsewhere, but I think you're right. For the most part, digital learning, online learning has been a plan for contingency that could be deployed when the need arises. I think we've had lots of plans in the past. I even went to a session one time; I think it was at OLC. It was great. Another institution was talking about how they support students, because they were an online institution or program, and they had students all across the country and they monitored disasters and events around the country. So, if there's a wildfire in California, or if there was a hurricane in North Carolina, or something, they would monitor all of this activity because they wanted to put student support services there. Now, that's a little bit different than, "We need to keep the operations of the university going." That's more like targeted at student support. But I think the mindset is the same.

Kelvin: Yeah. So, not something to be discarded, or dismissed, or diminished just because so many of us are ready to turn a page and not think about global pandemics anymore.

Tom: Yeah.

Kelvin: This preparation work is important all the time.

Tom: Yeah, yeah. And I think having a plan, even if it doesn't a hundred percent fit the square peg, round hole, but you've got something you could start with, right? You may remember when we were planning what if SARS, or bird flu, or something came, what would we do?

Kelvin: Ooh, I do remember.

Tom: Yeah. And so, we did some of that exercise to plan for it. And I think some of that informed our eventual COVID response in some ways, how we thought about it. So, whether it's a hurricane, well, the hurricane plan could be applied to a tornado or a wildfire, depending on whatever it is, just the details need to be changed. But the worst time to be dealing with a strategy is in the middle of the event itself.

Kelvin: Yeah, absolutely. Well said. Absolutely. So, would you like to try to get this bird on the ground?

Tom: Let's try. So, Kelvin, as you said, while some of us have certainly had our share of thinking about the continuity of operations in the last three years or so, if we have learned anything after going through a global pandemic, we should be prepared to have our work disrupted and have it continue for the benefit of our students, our

faculty, and our staff. Digital learning, I think, has an important role to play in all of that.

(*Musical Outro*)

Kelvin: Yeah, excellent. I think that's right. A good reminder for us all. [Chuckles] Well, thanks for sharing your Diet Coke while I shared my coffee virtually through the magic window of Zoom. And thank you to Patti O'Sullivan for joining us. And, until next time, I'm Kelvin.

Tom: And I'm Tom.

Kelvin: See ya.